



Latin America brims with vibrant festivals, and it's not just about the carnivals. **Laura French** seeks out some lesser-known options

does anywhere throw a fiesta quite like Latin America? From Rio Carnival – ‘the greatest party on Earth’ – to Mexico’s death-honouring Dia de los Muertos, via age-old indigenous festivals, extravagant float parades and plenty beyond, this diverse, music-loving region has something to tick just about every box.

You could easily spend several years exploring its February carnivals alone, with almost every country offering some form of Mardi Gras celebration in the run-up to lent – from egg, flower and water fights in Ecuador to folk dances in Bolivia, theatrical *murga* performances in Argentina to water-filled street parties in Panama – but there’s

plenty beyond the carnival festivities, with enough revelry to fill an entire year’s calendar (and then some).

It’s not just about the bigger players, either. For those wanting to really get under the skin of the region – and witness age-old, authentic traditions that have shaped its places and people across the centuries – you’ll find plenty of lesser-known alternatives, from Andean rituals to kite-flying competitions, striking flower parades and more.

We’ve compiled a list of some of the best to get you and your clients feeling inspired, so read on to find out what and where to sell to culture vultures on the hunt for their next big hit.



BARRANQUILLA CARNIVAL, COLOMBIA

Colombia’s annual Mardi Gras festival is every bit as extravagant as you’d expect from the world’s second-biggest carnival, with a string of elaborate float parades and colourful street parties taking place across four days. The biggest celebrations take place in Caribbean coastal town Barranquilla, where performers shimmy on down to salsa, samba, cumbia and other local music, while weeping performers mourn the death of mythical character ‘Joselito’ on the final day.

MEDELLIN FLOWER FESTIVAL, COLOMBIA

THE BACKGROUND: It’s not just in February that the festivities descend on Colombia. Medellin turns into a riot of colour every August, when the Feria de las Flores transforms its streets into one ginormous, ultra-pretty florist – showcasing the country’s reputation as the world’s second-biggest flower producer.

HIGHLIGHTS: At its heart is the Silleteros Parade, when flower growers march around the city carrying exotic arrangements and sculptures – weighing up to 70kg and spanning up to five metres – on their backs. Open-air music and cultural performances take place across the city, as well as firework displays, equestrian activities, a dog parade, classic-car parade and improv singing battle. “It brings some of the country’s biggest growers together for weeks of celebrations, as they compete for the most beautiful arrangement,” says Carmel Hendry, Explore product manager for the Americas.

BOOK IT: Explore has a special Flower Festival departure on its 13-day Contrasts of Colombia trip, departing August 2, 2020. Prices start at £3,770 including flights and accommodation.

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CARNAVAL DE URURO, BOLIVIA

Drawing crowds of up to 400,000, Bolivia's annual carnival takes place high in the Altiplano, in the city of Oruro. Blending ancient Andean rituals – including the worship of 'Mother Earth', Pachamama – with Catholic traditions, it involves folk dances, indigenous crafts and live music across three days, with costumed characters including the Devil, the Virgen de la Candelaria and famous Incas roaming the streets in colourful parades.

INTI RAYMI FESTIVAL, PERU

THE BACKGROUND: For an alternative glimpse into the country's Andean cultures, look to Cusco's Inti Raymi Festival, which dates back more than 500 years. The Incas believed honouring the sun god Inti would reap good harvests, and would perform special dances and animals sacrifices in his honour. Today, it's re-enacted in a day-long celebration on June 24.

HIGHLIGHTS: The lead-up to the main event sees Cusco's main square come alive with daily Andean music and dancing, plus parades, nightly firework displays and traditional Inca foods. On the final day, actors take on the roles of Inca representatives, praising the sun god before making their way towards the ancient site of Saqsaywaman against a dramatic backdrop of panpipes, horns and drums. "It draws thousands of visitors with colourful parades and dances, and is well worth recommending for an authentic Latin American festival," says Andrew Sullivan, assistant product and commercial manager for touring at Travel 2.

BOOK IT: An eight-day Inti Raymi Festival & Inca Trail small-group tour costs from £1,759 including accommodation, some meals, a four-day Inca Trail hike and flights, departing June 22, 2020. travel2.com



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DAY OF THE DEAD, MEXICO

Death-honouring traditions, skull-strewn costumes and dramatic music performances; once an Aztec ritual, Mexico's Dia de los Muertos is now one of the most talked-about festivities in Latin America. Celebrated across the country around All Saints Day (November 1), it sees friends and family come together to decorate ancestors' altars with colourful gifts, while feasts and performers take to the streets.

KITE FESTIVAL, GUATEMALA

THE BACKGROUND: Guatemala's answer to All Saints Day is the Giant Kite Festival, when thousands gather in a graveyard in the small town of Sumpango to fly kites in honour of the deceased.

HIGHLIGHTS: Live music, street food and other festivities accompany the event, with kites – which span up to 20m in diameter – handmade by villagers using paper, cloth and bamboo frames. "It's a kaleidoscope of colour," says Rafe Stone, product manager for Central America at Journey Latin America. "The designs are chosen carefully, featuring important cultural symbols, Mayan influences and protest art depicting government oppression and economic inequality." There are prizes for the most creative and longest-flying, while various other festivities attract those seeking an authentic, historical experience.

BOOK IT: Journey Latin America can include a visit to the festival on its tailor-made, 15-day Signature Guatemala and Belize: Culture and Caribbean trip, which starts at £3,126 per person including flights.

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